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AUTHOR Duncan, Elaine
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ABSTRACT

Diversity is welcomed at the Jefferson Davis Campus, Mississippi Gulf Coast Junior College, where the commuting students include teenagers, retired military personnel, displaced homemakers, the foreign-born, blacks, the full-time employed, and senior citizens. The students are counseled to take a reading and study skills class if their reading test scores indicate a need in the areas of comprehension, speed, interpretation, or study skills. In the first weeks, the objective is to improve the student's self-image along with improvement of reading skills, mathematics skills, or language arts. Activities are planned for adult students which are compatible with their goals and their backgrounds. The instructor of the reading and study skills class emphasizes time use and time organization. In the developmental studies programs, "educationese" is interpreted for divergent populatons on a one-to-one basis or in small group sessions. All students are given written competencies for the class, and the order of presentation is determined by the need of the students. The instructor requires that the students give weekly oral and written reports on news items of interest to them and gives the students activities that make direct application of skills to other courses or to life needs. (EM)

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DEALING WITH DIVERSITY

Presented by

Elaine Duncan

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DEALING WITH DIVERSITY

Elaine Duncan

Jefferson Davis Campus
Mississippi Gulf Coast Junior College
Gulfport, Mississippi

Dealing with diversity is a way to bring heterogeneous populations in commuter college classes into interactions that result in learning. On our campus diversity takes many forms: teen-agers learning to deal with responsibility, retired military who are accustomed to being authority figures, displaced homemakers who are fearful that they cannot succeed, foreign born learning English as they learn college level subject matter, Black students who still have language difficulty even though most of them have grown up in integrated schools, full-time employed who must juggle classes and work schedules, and senior citizens who have definite goals and definite ideas about how to reach those goals.

We welcome diversity. It makes life interesting--difficult, perhaps, but interesting. It comes as a shock to some of the students just out of high school to find themselves sharing classes with retired military people and displaced homemakers who are returning to the academic world after twenty or thirty years of unstructured learning. On the other hand, the older students often are insecure, believing that they cannot keep pace with the young students who have had more recent experiences with learning and test-taking. Some of the full-time employed work the night shift and come to class before going to bed. For them, the 7:00 a.m. classes are made-to-order. Instructors have to be understanding when their policemen students must be out of school to appear in court.

Flexibility is essential. The teacher must always be aware that the objective is to help students learn, not just to teach the course at hand. A teacher

may present a very eloquent dissertation or fill two chalkboards with figures and diagrams that look beautiful but if the students do not understand, the teacher has not taught. The teacher dealing with diversity must be very perceptive of feedback from the students and must have infinite patience to explain again and in other words points that are misunderstood.

One great challenge is the student who ambles into class, sprawls in a chair, and disconnects his hearing aid. His whole attitude says, "I'm here; just you try to make me learn!" It is so rewarding to see that student catch the spark and become a good student.

I teach reading and study skills. (The usual reaction is: "READING IN COLLEGE! It is quite acceptable and respectable to teach speech in college, and students learned to speak long before they were introduced to reading.) Students in our school are counseled to take reading if test scores indicate a need in the area of comprehension, speed, interpretation, or study skills. Many students choose to take reading because they recognize a need or a friend has told them how beneficial the course is. From the beginning, I let the students know that I understand if they hate reading. Some students have made a career of avoiding books. That is understandable. If one is a poor tennis player, one may choose to swim or play golf, but in reading one has no such choice. In today's society, there is no place for the non-reader, no job opportunities.

We begin where the student is, and we do not just give lip-service to that concept. In the first weeks, one objective is to improve the student's self-image along with improvement of reading skills, mathematics skills, or language arts. People who have been conditioned to failure expect to fail, so the first step forward must be success. The student must be engaged in activities through which a measure of success can be immediate.

I realize that we are not unique in recognizing that students with limited proficiency in English are likely to make more progress in short, spaced periods of carefully designed input than in long hours in large classes listening to what, to them, comes through as gibberish or noise. In our developmental studies program, we try to interpret "educationese" for divergent populations in one-to-one or small group sessions.

Recognizing that adults are not just older children, we direct adults in their quest for knowledge, planning with them activities that are compatible with their goals and their backgrounds. The older adult is performance oriented and insists on relevancy. Whatever he/she is asked to do must be perceived as meaningful and leading toward a recognized goal. Every time I introduce a new skill, I make a point of explaining "why" and how that skill is useful.

A common complaint in our society is a lack of time. We are all making a mad dash through life, hardly SEEING the roses that we are advised to SMELL. Therefore, I emphasize time use and the value of organization. This is especially important for our divergent population, many of whom are balancing job, school, family, and social responsibilities. I advise students to incorporate into their notebooks a calendar on which they can record ALL assignments, concerts, or other obligations so that they have a total picture of their time commitments. Each student must view himself as one unit, not a collection of people meeting diverse demands. I compare scheduling time to making a family budget (which many of the younger students have not experienced, but they can relate to the income/outgo aspect of money). One cannot easily control or change committed expenses just as the student has committed time (classes, job, etc.). One can control and make changes in the allotment for food, clothing, and such even though those are necessities. Just so, the student can control the time spent in study and arrange the best use of time for that. Then there are things that the budget maker may have to omit or severely limit if funds are inadequate, which leads me to

a discussion of "small blocks of time" that can be advantageously used for learning vocabulary, working problems, checking out books, and the like. Those are the ten- and fifteen-minute periods through the day that are not on the budget. It is possible to increase the income by getting a better job, taking a second job, or getting a salary increase, but the most creative among us cannot add hours to the twenty-four that each of us is allotted. All of us have the same amount of time; it is the use of it that determines success or possible ulcers and high blood pressure. Older students understand the comparison immediately because of their experience; teen-agers can be helped to learn good habits before they have wasted time on bad habits.

All students are given written competencies for the class. The order of presentation is determined by the needs of the students. I incorporate a generous amount of humor in instruction, often using cartoons to introduce vocabulary or emphasize a point. I ask the students to read at least one news story each week and turn in a written report about that story, so I often share with the class news accounts which have come to my attention which I think will interest or amuse them. Students of any age enjoy having stories read to them if it is approached in the right manner. Every poor reader benefits from an occasional exposure to a good reading model. That is not egotism on my part; it is assumed that a reading teacher is a good reader.

It is especially important to make direct application of skills to other courses or to life needs, so that the student can see continuity and need-satisfaction. When I have ministers or radio majors in my class, I allow time for them to have oral reading experiences. When I have business people (or potential business people), I show them how to speed-read letters and have immediate responses recorded to save rereading later.

Teaching is rewarding, and dealing with diversity is a challenge that is unending and stimulating.